

Depronominalization and Gender Ideology

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> Introduction

Research question: What do depronominalizations mean socially?

Depronominalizations are pronouns used with articles, as in (1) and (2). Depronominalizations have not been widely studied from either a syntactic or a sociopragmatic perspective.

In [1], I found several instances of spontaneously-occurring depronominalizations on Twitter:

- (1) Please stop referring to Chelsea Manning as "him", **she is a "her"**.
- (2) Bradley Manning is a **HE**, regardless of whether he likes it or not.

What motivates speakers to use pronouns in this syntactically marked way? [2] analyze depronominalized pronouns as meaning something like *a man* or *a woman*, but the definitions of those are ideologically contested.

> Background

Pronouns have been analyzed as full NPs, ϕ Ps ([3] a.o.), or as intransitive D heads ([4] a.o.). Applying these analyses to depronominalization brings up some questions:



If pronouns are determiners, either they must be demoted to the N layer in order to appear in pronominalizations (which would be very unusual), or they are DPs selected by a second, external D (shown above; also very unusual). If however they are NPs selected by null D heads, then why do they show properties of DPs elsewhere?

> Method

Twitter data were extracted from the Twitter public application programming interface (API) with an R [6] script using the plyr [8] and twitteR [5] libraries[7]. After duplicates were removed, there were 5,836 tweets with *a he* and 4,041 with *a she*. I took a random sample of 300 tweets from each set.

The data were hand-tagged for:

- containing a depronominalization (to exclude errored search results)
- copular construction, e.g. (5)
- metapragmatic comment about pronoun use, e.g. (8)
- comment about the gender identity of a referent, e.g. (6)

> Examples of depronominalizations found

Many tweets were comments about pronoun use and gender identity.

(5) Copula Constructions

- a. My person is a **he**. He'll always be remembered and I daresay till the day I die unless amnesia kicks in then forgive me. [2370]
- b. he hid. if he is a **he** and if a cockroach has a gender. he hid. i know he did. i cant find that cockroach now but i know he's ready 2 attack [5094]
- c. you fucking sexist hippocryte! nothing other than the tutu suggests it's a **she** or it needs a lift. and I like it! [7074]
- d. He should learn to put his lipstick on better if he is going to be a **she**. [6880]

(6) About Transgender Referents

- a. [...] @xychelsea She was born with a [phallus] so obviously its a **he** [48]
- b. irritating to hear @FoxNews people calling brad /csea manning a **she**, NOPE, it's a **he**, always will be, just like [bruce jenner] [5854]
- c. the worst thing people who are cis do is the whole like when i'm like "he's trans" and they ask "so are they a **he** or a **she**" and its like !!?" [8575]

(7) Generic Gendered Statements

- a. She's not perfect, because a **she** will never able to be perfect.. [7184]
- b. @TheSun She wasn't that brainy to stab though was she? If She had been a **He** think the slammer would be beckoning. [1658]

(8) Metapragmatic Comments

- a. The Specialists sound ridiculous referring to Chelsea Manning as a "**she**" - how awkwardly pc!" [7229]
- b. My boss' pet. It's a **she** according to him. [3797]

> Contested Gender

Many tweets were about asserting or contesting the asserted gender of some referent.

Many examples, as in (6b) and (8a), were comments about **transgender referents**. Other examples, as in (8b), were about the gender of a pet or animal.

Many tweets were specific metapragmatic comments on others' pronoun use.

Examples include (6c) and (8a) above. Note that, again, comments on pronoun use are often centered around transgender referents.

> Discussion

Main finding: the use of depronominalization in English is largely centered around asserting, contesting, or making metapragmatic comments on the gender of pronouns.

Based on these data:

- support for analysis of depronominalization as generic gendered nouns [2]
- different definitions of gender lead to conflict
- metapragmatic comments address conflict

Future work:

- what syntactic structure can account for this use of pronouns?
- can all pronouns be pronominalized, or only 3rd person? In other languages?
- how are conflicts in metapragmatic understanding of pronouns negotiated/resolved?

References

- [1] Kirby Conrod. Names before pronouns: Variation in pronominal reference and gender. In *North West Linguistics Conference*, 2017.
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- [4] Paul Elbourne. *Definite descriptions*, volume 1. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- [5] Jeff Gentry. *twitteR: R Based Twitter Client*, 2015. R package version 1.1.9.
- [6] R Core Team. *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria, 2015.
- [7] Rachael Tatman. *getTweets*, 2016.
- [8] Hadley Wickham. The split-apply-combine strategy for data analysis. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 40(1):1–29, 2011.

> Properties of Depronominalization

Of the samples of 300 each, about a third contained depronominalizations (as opposed to errored search results).

Proportion of Sample that included Depronominalizations, comments, and copulas

Pronoun	Depronominalized	Gender comment	Pronoun comment	Copula
<i>a he</i>	n = 94	85%	64%	86%
<i>a she</i>	n = 140	85%	68%	77%
Total	n = 234	85%	66%	79%